



Is the Chinese Army the Real Winner in PLA Reforms?

By Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen

Ground force officers run China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). About 70 percent of PLA soldiers serve in the PLA Army (PLAA), and ground officers occupy almost all senior positions on the

Central Military Commission (CMC) and in China's new theater commands. The PLA's history, traditions, and organizational culture are all built upon the PLAA role in bringing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power. Until the establishment of a separate army headquarters in January 2016, the PLA's major organizations (the general departments) existed primarily to serve the needs of the army.¹ Pictures of the CMC staff or of visiting Chinese National Defense University delega-

tions show only a smattering of navy white and air force blue uniforms in a sea of army green.

Despite this traditional dominance, the PLAA has lost status, budget share, and end strength relative to the other services in recent years. Since 2004, Chinese defense white papers have emphasized the need for increased funding for the navy, air force, and Second Artillery (which was elevated in status and renamed the Rocket Force in January 2016). "Optimizing the composition of the

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services and arms of the PLA” has meant reductions in “technologically backward” PLAA units and personnel increases for the other services.² Most of the 300,000 troops that will be cut from the PLA will come from army ranks. Moreover, the army is widely perceived as the likely loser in current PLA organizational reforms.³ Elimination of the general departments and establishment of a new army commander and headquarters reduced the army to bureaucratic equality with the other services. The PLAA also lost direct control of space and cyber units, which were transferred to the new Strategic Support Force.

Current senior PLAA officers all retained their rank and were given new positions after the reforms, but there is no guarantee that this transitional arrangement will continue when the next military command shuffle occurs in 2017. Some positions may be downgraded once the current incumbents leave, and the other services will press for more leadership positions on the CMC staff.

The apparent PLAA sense of decline may be intensifying. Despite President and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping’s insistence that the army plays an “ir-replaceable” role in protecting national interests,⁴ the new PLAA commander used his first media interview to refute the notion that “land warfare was outdated and the army is useless.” Editorials in the *PLA Daily* and other outlets followed suit shortly thereafter.⁵

The current reform’s emphasis on improving the PLA’s ability to conduct multi-service joint operations [军种联合作战, *junzhong lianhe zuozhan*] implies a higher status and increased funding for the navy, air force, Rocket Force, and the new Strategic Support Force. The steady decline in PLAA size, status, and relevance poses an interesting puzzle: why would a PLA dominated by army officers acquiesce to reforms that apparently further weaken the status of the service?

In this article, we argue that the reforms can also be read as an effort by PLAA commanders to use new joint command and control (C2) arrangements to reassert the service’s strategic relevance and political muscle by gaining

the ability to command assets controlled by the other services. We flesh out the argument that core army capabilities have become less relevant to China’s most pressing external threats and national security priorities, examine why the army failed to adapt, and highlight how new PLA joint C2 structures may serve PLAA institutional interests at a potential cost in overall operational effectiveness.

Shifting Priorities and Decreasing Army Relevance

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and improved relations with many neighboring countries removed China’s most serious traditional military threats. With the exception of a continuing land border dispute with India, China currently faces no major threats on its borders, reducing the salience of the PLAA’s traditional mission of defending against land invasion.⁶ Although the service could be called upon to respond to border contingencies in North Korea, Burma, or Pakistan, China’s remaining land threats mainly involve cross-border terrorism or instability in neighboring countries.⁷

As land threats dissipated, China’s rapid integration into the global economy created increasingly important national interests well beyond its immediate land borders. The shift in China’s strategic orientation toward the sea and away from land threats began as early as the 1980s.⁸ Changes in China’s “Military Strategic Guidelines” in 1993 reflected an increased emphasis on Taiwan contingencies and protecting maritime interests in the South and East China seas, all of which required power projection capabilities as well as the capacity to forestall U.S. intervention in order to achieve the desired results.⁹

Hu Jintao’s 2004 “New Historic Missions” [新的历史使命] marked a clear shift in Chinese national security priorities, calling for the armed forces to secure party rule, safeguard national development, protect national interests, and promote world peace and common development.¹⁰ Securing sea lines of communication, protecting Chinese nationals and economic interests overseas, and

contributing to global public goods such as counterpiracy, counterterrorism, peace-keeping, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations have all figured more prominently as PLA missions.¹¹ Consistent with this shift, China declared itself a “maritime power” in the 2012 party congress work report and has given maritime and overseas operations pride of place in recent defense white papers.

The PLAA is relevant to some of Hu’s “New Historic Missions,” but these do not justify much manpower or the acquisition of new capabilities. The army retains formal responsibility for the high-priority missions of maintaining domestic stability and ensuring CCP rule, but in practice primary responsibility for these functions has shifted to the public security forces and the People’s Armed Police (PAP).¹²

The 2015 defense white paper calls for the armed forces to protect Chinese air, land, and sea sovereignty; protect Chinese unification; safeguard Chinese security in new domains; maintain regional and world peace; protect overseas interests; maintain strategic nuclear deterrence; counter separatists and terrorists; and perform emergency rescue and disaster relief missions.¹³ The 2015 white paper, along with other authoritative PLA writings such as the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, also place great emphasis on major power competition in the maritime, nuclear, space, and cyber domains.¹⁴

However, the PLAA has either lost or never owned the capabilities most relevant to a party leadership that is increasingly focused on missions outside China’s land borders. The army does not have rapid reaction airborne forces or the strategic lift capabilities needed to move forces beyond China’s land borders—paratroopers and strategic airlift assets both belong to the air force. The PLAA does not operate long-range surface-to-air missiles that can defend Chinese airspace, does not command conventional or nuclear missile forces that can enable power projection or deter nuclear attack, and has now ceded space and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and

reconnaissance missions to the Strategic Support Force.

Even in areas where army capabilities are relevant to China's new strategic focus, the PLAA faces stiff competition from other services. Army amphibious units would have primary responsibility for the ground aspects of an invasion of Taiwan, but the PLA Navy Marine Corps has the lead for South China Sea amphibious operations. Each service in the PLA operates unmanned aerial vehicles of various types for its own purposes.¹⁵ The PLAA has ceded many counterterrorism missions to Ministry of Public Security forces and the PAP. Though the PLAA has developed an air assault capability, is increasingly mechanized, and has improved its ability to move forces within China, it would require considerable support from other services to get to and stay in the fight, especially if the fight is outside China's borders or across water.

Why Didn't the Army Adapt?

Given the slow-moving nature of China's strategic shift, why did the PLAA fail to foresee the declining relevance of its capabilities and missions and adjust its priorities accordingly? Three possible explanations exist for the PLAA's current predicament.

One is the historical legacy of the Soviet military. The PLAA was patterned on the Soviet Red Army, which placed ballistic missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and paratroopers in different organizations outside army control. These organizational choices may not have struck army commanders as important concessions during the early days of the People's Republic of China, but once the missions and forces were ceded to other services, the PLAA was unable to wrest these capabilities back.

A second explanation focuses on China's traditional status as a continental power. PLAA leaders may have believed that the mission of protecting Chinese territory from invasion was important enough to justify preservation and modernization of core army capabilities. The PLAA has focused heavily on mechanization of the army and combined arms operations to improve ground combat

capability, and army leaders have been willing to accept large reductions in troop strength to fund this modernization.¹⁶ A focus on improving the PLAA's ability to perform its traditional mission may have blinded army leaders to the increasing priority of other missions where army capabilities were less relevant.

A PLA debate in the early 2000s about the relative priority and sequencing of "mechanization" and "informationization" was a proxy for debates about the relative priority of service missions. The PLAA would have benefited most from a sequential approach that prioritized mechanization as a stepping stone toward informationization; the decision to pursue both goals simultaneously reduced the PLAA's claim on funding and allowed other services and specialized elements of the PLA to stake their own claims for modernization resources.¹⁷

Beyond mechanization, the PLAA's chief modernization priority has been in developing "new type forces" better suited for offensive operations. These include special operations, helicopter, electronic warfare, light mechanized, and long-range artillery units that may have more applicability to maritime and overseas missions. However, many of these capabilities remain comparatively underdeveloped despite high prioritization and two decades of modernization, and recent army transregional exercises have not emphasized an expeditionary role for the PLAA.¹⁸

A third possibility is that the PLAA's ability to advocate for army missions and priorities may have been hindered by a lack of bureaucratic coherence. An "army-by-default" mentality undercut the need to create a PLAA-specific identity and mission set, and the abundant but diffuse army presence in the highest levels of military command meant no single voice was responsible for advocating for army priorities. In contrast, other services were forced to carve out separate identities, missions, and service cultures to assert their independence and to capture resources and personnel. Once established, the services would naturally resist any PLAA efforts to take over capabilities most relevant to new missions and

priorities. (The new army headquarters will give the PLAA commander both a platform and the responsibility to advocate for army priorities; the army is also using reforms to educate soldiers about its future role and identity.¹⁹)

Military Reforms: Expanding Army Control at the Expense of Effectiveness?

Given the PLAA's decreasing relevance to new tasks and missions, the military reforms could be interpreted as a way for the PLAA to reassert its strategic relevance and expand its control over other parts of the PLA. The new CMC Joint Staff Department, which has overall responsibility for joint operations, is commanded by former Chief of the General Staff Fang Fenghui of the PLAA. Army officers currently command all five theater commands (and hold four of the five political commissar positions at the theaters).²⁰ The new joint C2 structure gives these army officers full operational command over forces from all services during both war and peacetime. Under the old system, military region commanders did not exercise peacetime operational control over navy, air force, and Second Artillery assets within their areas of responsibility. Under the new system, the navy and air force headquarters no longer have an operational command role. The CMC Joint Staff Department has set up a new Overseas Operations Office that should eventually exercise control over PLA forces deployed far outside China's borders.

If the theater commands become the critical proving ground for future PLA leaders, then the PLAA will want to continue to reserve these positions for army officers. Going forward, the PLAA will likely seek to define the qualifications for joint command assignments and control the pipeline for new operational commanders in ways that benefit army officers. Reforms in China's military education system will create a new "operational command track" in the PLA National Defense University courses that train PLA officers for promotion to senior positions.²¹ Attendance in command



Soldier makes fish trap during survival phase of Exercise Kowari 2016, Australian army–hosted survival skills exercise designed to increase defense cooperation between forces from the United States, Australia, and China, September 4, 2016 (Australian Defence Force/Jake Sims)

track courses will likely become a requirement for future joint command assignments. Whether that track is exclusive to or dominated by army offices will be a key leading indicator of whether the PLAA will continue to hold on to theater command slots and key CMC joint command positions. Conversely, if the navy, air force, and rocket force are over-represented in those courses, this would indicate an intent to rebalance joint command positions in ways that benefit officers from other services and create a more joint force.

From this perspective, the PLA's new joint C2 structure centered on theater commands may reflect the dominance of army thinking and army institutional interests. In some cases, this may produce suboptimal warfighting outcomes. The U.S. military emphasizes flexibility in conducting joint operations, selecting commanders from different Services

based on the most likely missions within a theater or putting together joint task forces led by a commander from the most relevant Service for the mission. In contrast, the current PLA approach of placing joint C2 mechanisms at the theater command level injects an army commander into the operational chain of command even if the mission does not require it. An army general heading the Southern Theater Command may not be best qualified to command forces in South China Sea maritime disputes; his presence in the chain of command adds an extra layer that subordinates must navigate to include other services in planning and conducting operations.

Conclusion

We began with a puzzle: why would a PLA dominated by ground officers embrace joint reforms likely to reduce the size, status, and bureaucratic pre-

rogatives of the army relative to other services? A bureaucratic politics lens produces an unexpected answer: organizational reforms nominally intended to improve the Chinese military's ability to conduct joint operations have been heavily shaped by army organizational interests and will actually expand the ability of PLAA commanders to control forces currently owned by other services. The resulting C2 arrangements may be suboptimal for some kinds of joint operations (especially those with a heavy air or maritime focus).

A key question going forward is whether army officers will continue to hold on to key joint command positions in the CMC Joint Staff Department and in the theater commands, or whether officers from other services will eventually be able to stake a claim to those positions. Will the PLAA be able to influence selection, evaluation, and promotion criteria



Australian army–hosted Exercise Kowari 2016, at Larrakeyah Barracks, Northern Territory, Australia, focused on increasing friendship and trust between forces from the United States, Australia, and China through trilateral cooperation in Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Rim regions, August 26, 2016 (U.S. Marine Corps/Osvaldo L. Ortega III)

for theater command and joint command positions? To what extent will army-led theater commands delegate operational authority to service components? How will the new army headquarters fare in bureaucratic scuffles with other service headquarters? The answers to these questions will help determine whether the reforms will create a genuinely joint PLA, or serve as a backdoor means for army officers to extend their traditional dominance. JFQ

Notes

¹ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, Strategic Forum 294 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, April 2016); Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds., *The PLA as Organization v2.0* (Vienna, VA: Defense Group, Inc., 2015).

² State Council Information Officer, "China's National Defense in 2004," December 27, 2003.

³ Saunders and Wuthnow; Kenneth W. Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, Jr., *The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What Is Known, Unknown, and Speculation (Part 1)*, China Brief 16, no. 3 (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, February 4, 2016); *China Security Report 2016: The Expanding Scope of PLA Activities and PLA Strategy* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2016), 62.

⁴ "Army Commander: Eliminate the Mistaken Belief that 'Land Warfare Is Outdated and

the Army Is Useless,'" *People's Daily*, February 16, 2016, available at <<http://ah.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0216/c358316-27744249.html>>.

⁵ "Army Commander Li Zuocheng: Construct a Strong, Modernized, New-Type Ground Force," *People's Daily*, January 31, 2016, available at <<http://sn.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0131/c358036-27662181.html>>; "Innovation in Military Theory Requires Avoiding Both 'Large Army' and 'Ground Forces Are Useless' Mentalities," *People's Daily*, February 23, 2016, available at <<http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0223/c1011-28142430.html>>.

⁶ See Michael A. Glosny and Phillip C. Saunders, "Correspondence: Debating China's Naval Nationalism," *International Security* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2010), 161–164.

⁷ Andrew Scobell et al., eds., *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015); Paul B. Stares, *Managing Instability on China's Periphery* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

⁸ David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 110.

⁹ Mark A. Cozad, "The PLA and Contingency Planning," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, 20.

¹⁰ James C. Mulvenon, *Chairman Hu and the New Historic Missions*, China Leadership Monitor, No. 27 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, January 9, 2009), available at <<http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>>.

¹¹ Oriana Mastro, "China's Military Is About to Go Global," *The National Interest*, December 18, 2014.

¹² See Phillip C. Saunders and Isaac Kardon, "Reconsidering the PLA as an Interest Group," in *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 46.

¹³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Military Strategy," May 2015.

¹⁴ Ibid.; *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences, 2013).

¹⁵ Elsa Kania and Kenneth Allen, *The Human and Organizational Dimensions of the PLA's Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Systems*, China Brief 16, no. 8 (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, May 11, 2016).

¹⁶ Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today* (New York: Routledge, 2012); James C. Mulvenon, "The PLA Army's Struggle for Identity," in *The People's Liberation Army and China in Transition*, ed. Stephen J. Flanagan and Michael E. Marti (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2003).

¹⁷ The changing language describing the relationship between mechanization and informationization in Chinese defense white papers is a good proxy for the status of the debate. See *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2004), available at <<http://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/natdef2004.html>>.

¹⁸ Dennis J. Blasko, "Clarity of Intentions: People's Liberation Army Transregional Exercises to Defend China's Borders," in *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 198.

¹⁹ "Army Headquarters Begins to Develop Education on Reform Topics," *Jiefangjun Bao*, January 5, 2016, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0105/c64387-28014384.html>>.

²⁰ Note that Lieutenant General Zhu Fuxi, political commissar of the Western Theater Command, is nominally an air force officer but spent most of his career in the ground forces.

²¹ Zhang Shibo and Liu Yazhou, "Strive to Build a Supreme Military Academy That Attains the World's Advanced Standards and Boasts Unique Chinese Characteristics—On Deeply Studying and Implementing the Important Speech by Chairman Xi During His Inspection of the National Defense University," *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 18, 2016, 6.